Mojave Trail-Road System 1826-1860

By

Steve F. Russell, PhD, PE

Mohave = Mojave

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Steve F. Russell, PhD, PE, is an emeritus faculty member, retired after a 20-year career in industry and a 23-year career in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Iowa State University. His expertise is in the areas of Communication System Theory, Radio Systems, Electronics, Statistics and Mathematics, Global Positioning System, Geographic Information Systems, Historic Trails Research, and Traditional New Orleans Jazz. Steve dabbles in Ham Radio and Theoretical Physics. He can be contacted by email at SFR@IASTATE.EDU

January 1, 2015

Photo at Lewis and Clark Ordway Camp, Cougar Rapids Bar, Idaho. 2010

2011 Dusty Chords Jazz Band
Heartland Senior Services Wine and Cheese Party
Lisa Merritt, Vocals; Steve Hurst, Guitar; Mark Forbis, Piano; Steve F. Russell, Trumpet

Author's Note: I apologize for not doing my usual extensive reporting of the details of my research. As it becomes clear to me that my age is catching up with me, I need to produce final reports and maps, of my historical trail research, as fast as practical. I also apologize for the mistakes my fingers make in creating the words. I can't seem to do better.

Steve F. Russell
September 11, 2024

In this report, the term Mojave Trail will be used to refer to the original Mojave Indian Tribe trail, as followed by Whipple in 1854. The term Mohave Road will be used to refer to the Old Government Road, constructed in the years 1857-1860.

Summary of Trail and Road Facts

The Mojave Trail (1854) went from Needles, Ca, westward to Forks-of-the Road, 15 miles east of Barstow, CA.

The Mohave Road (1860) went from Fort Mohave, AZ, westward, to Forks-of-the Road, 15 miles east of Barstow, CA.

Length of the Mojave Trail (1854) = 142.2 miles.

Length of the Mohave Road (Old Government Road, 1860) = 140.1 miles.

Both routes crossed the Mojave Desert, from water source to water source, between the Colorado River and the Mojave River.

Jedediah Smith[1], trader and explorer, followed the Mojave Trail route in 1826-1827, as he explored for trail routes between Utah Lake, UT and St. Gabriel, CA. In the Mojave Desert area, he went from the Virgin River, NV to Mojave Canyon, CA.

Lieutenant A. W. Whipple[2], Topographical Engineers, U.S. War Department, followed, and documented, the Mojave Trail route in 1854.

First Lieutenant George M. Wheeler[3], Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, followed and documented, the Mohave Road route in 1875.

The Old Government Road, of 1860, is documented in USGS Topo Maps, ca1980s.

I could find no historical evidence of a "Mojave Road," going northward from Piute Spring to the Las Vegas Wash (as shown in National Park Service Maps).

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[1] According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, Jedediah Strong Smith (January 6, 1799 – May 27, 1831), was the first American to enter California from the east, and return, by using an overland route.

[2] According to Wikipedia, Amiel Weeks Whipple (October 21, 1817 – May 7, 1863), was an American military officer and Topographical Engineer.

[3] According to Wikipedia, Lieutenant George Montague Wheeler (October 9, 1842 – May 3, 1905), was an American pioneering explorer and cartographer and the leader of the Wheeler Survey, one of the major geographical surveys of the western United States in the late 19th century.

INTRODUCTION - A Profusion of Confusion

In my 36 years of doing scholarly research on historical western trails, I've never encountered a tougher challenge, than the location and documentation of the Mojave Trail-Road System (**MTRS**). After many hours of reading extensively from literature on the Internet and studying modern and historical maps, I believe I've come as close to the truth, in both location, and documentation, as possible.

I am not recommending any of the modern Internet sources as having accurate and non-conflicting information, because I don't want to give my stamp of approval on any of them. This includes the National Park System and the Bureau of Land Management sources. There is such a tangle of misinformation, I leave it to the reader to sort it out.

The exception is the remarkably extensive on-the-ground coverage of the Mojave Road area by Dave Barton (actually, he extensively covers the entire Mojave Desert area). Although he is not setting a definite boundary for the difference between the 1854 Mojave Trail and the 1857-1860 Mohave Road (Old Government Road), he provides a valuable resource for people wanting to explore the Mojave Desert area. It is also unclear as to the accuracy of his data, but the large-scale maps look good. This is not surprising, since, in the intervening 164 years, there has been the creation of a profusion of roads in the desert. You can read his extensive coverage of the "Mojave Road" at his website:

https://www.davebarton.com/mojave.html

The Mojave Road-Trail System (MRTS) was developed from the necessity to cross the Mojave Desert from East to West, with enough water sources to survive. Originally, it was a route used by the Mojave Indian Tribe to get across the desert by going from water source to water source. I could find no historical documentation for their original trail route across the desert.

In 1826-1827, Jedediah Smith crossed the Mojave desert as he traveled from southeast Idaho, through Utah, to southern California. He made two expeditions along this route, the first in 1826 and the second in 1827. Both expeditions crossed the desert along the Mojave Trail route of the Mojave Tribe. This same route was later followed by the Whipple expedition.

In 1854, the Mojave Trail was traveled and documented during the Whipple Expedition. The map that was created was adequate for me to reconstruct an reasonably accurate location of the trail. Of course, I used satellite photos to locate the erosion traces. The Old Government Road was well marked except for a few segments, and except for some minor mistakes by the map makers.

In 1857-1860, the U.S. Government pioneered a wagon road across the desert, using the old Mojave Trail as a guide (for water sources). This wagon road has been variously called the Mohave Road, the Old Government Road, and the Fort Mohave Road (1869).

I can find no historical evidence of a "Mohave Road" segment going northward between Piute Springs and the Las Vegas Wash. The first map I can find showing any roads in the same area is the map titled, Camp Mojave [Arizona, Nevada, California] 1:250,000 1892, which I found to be grossly inaccurate and not suitable for use in accurate research.

In summary, the following roads and trails are part of what I have called the Mojave Road-Trail System. The components of this trail system are:

1. (Historical) Mojave Indian Tribe Trail (across the southwest)
2. (1826-1827) Jedediah Smith Route (Colorado River north of Bullhead City, AZ, to Forks-of-the Road, CA) His entire route was from Utah Lake, UT, to St. Gabriel, CA.

3. (1854) Mojave Trail (Whipple) (Colorado River at Needles, CA, to Forks-of-the Road, 15 miles east of Barstow, CA).
4. (1857-1860) Mohave Road (Old Government Road, Fort Mohave Road, 1859) (Mojave Desert) (Colorado River at Fort Mohave, AZ to, to Forks-of-the Road, 15 miles east of Barstow, CA.)
5. (1875) Mohave Road (Wheeler) (Colorado River at Fort Mohave, AZ to, to Forks-of-the Road, 15 miles east of Barstow, CA.)

Mojave Indian Tribe Trail

(Historical)

The early US Government explorers and surveyors, such as Lewis and Clark, Fremont, Wheeler, Beckwourth, Berthold, Gunnison, etc, often marked segments of early aboriginal routes (Indian Trails) on their maps. This is a great help in trail research. Unfortunately, the earliest map I could find for this trail system was the 1854 map by the Whipple Expedition. I have not attempted to do further researching – I am leaving that to others.

Jedediah Smith Route

(Utah Lake to San Gabriel, CA, 1826-1827)
(Virgin River, NV to Mojave Canyon, CA)

In 1826-1827, Jedediah Smith crossed the Mojave desert as he traveled from southeast Idaho, through Utah (Utah Lake), to southern California. He made two expeditions along this route, the first in 1826 and the second in 1827. Both expeditions crossed the desert along the Mojave Trail route of the Mojave Tribe. This route was later traveled, and documented, by the 1854 Whipple Expedition.

The segment of the route Smith took, from what is now the mouth of the Virgin River under Lake Mead, was down the east side of the Colorado River.

Just north of Bullhead, AZ, , he crossed the Colorado River and turned westward to follow the Mojave Trail across the desert to the Mojave River, west of Mojave Canyon, CA. The segment of the Mojave Trail that he followed, from Piute Spring to Mojave Canyon, is the same trail segment used by the Whipple Expedition in 1854. Smith called the Colorado River the "Seedskedee River," and he called the Mojave River the "Inconstant River."

Mojave Trail (Whipple)

(Colorado River at Needles, CA, to Forks-of-the Road, 15 miles east of Barstow, CA).

The first reliable documentation I could find for the Mojave Trail was the Map 2. from the report on "Explorations and Surveys for a Rail Road, by the War Department 1853-54," which I have been calling the Whipple Expedition. It took a significant amount of time and effort to match the Whipple map to the topography of the desert route. Particularly gratifying was finding the water source he described as "water by digging." Its location is LAT 35.04674N and LON 116.16375W, near the abandoned town of Crucero, CA. (Crucero was once a railroad siding on the Union Pacific Railroad.) I speculate that the Mojave Trail (the segment crossing the Mojave Desert), fell into disuse after the construction of the Mohave Road (Old Government Road) in

1857-1860.

Mohave Road

(Old Government Road, Fort Mohave Road, 1859) (1857-1860)
(Colorado River at Fort Mohave, AZ, to Forks-of-the Road, 15 miles east of Barstow, CA.

When most authors write about the "Mohave Road," this is usually the route they are describing. Nearly all of the literature on the Internet is attempting to describe this road. It appears that this "road" was built to connect Fort Mohave with the "roads" connecting eastern Utah to Southern California.

Both Jedediah Smith, in 1826-1827m and Fremont, in 1842-1843 where attempting to establish the road we are calling the "Salt Lake and California Road." The Fremont route was, by far, the best route and was adopted by the Mormon Government in Salt Lake City, as the "official" 1847 Mormon Emigrant Trail to Southern California. Between 1847 and 1856, the Salt Lake and California Road became a well-traveled route between Salt Lake and San Bernardino.

Mohave Road - North

(Piute Spring, CA and Fort Piute to Los Vegas Wash, NV) (date unknown)

I have serious doubts that there was ever an actual constructed road, as shown in the NPS maps, for the following reasons:

1. I cannot find any historical documentation verifying its existence.
2. After an extensive search of historical map records, I have been unable to find a single historical map that shows it during the time period covered by this research.
3. The only source that has a map showing its existence is a modern NPS map, and I can find no verification of the source of that information.
4. The route followed by Jedediah Smith was on the east side of the Colorado River, not the west side.
5. The Internet site by Dave Barton does not show it.
6. And finally, the route of the Salt Lake and California Road was a much better route and widely used.

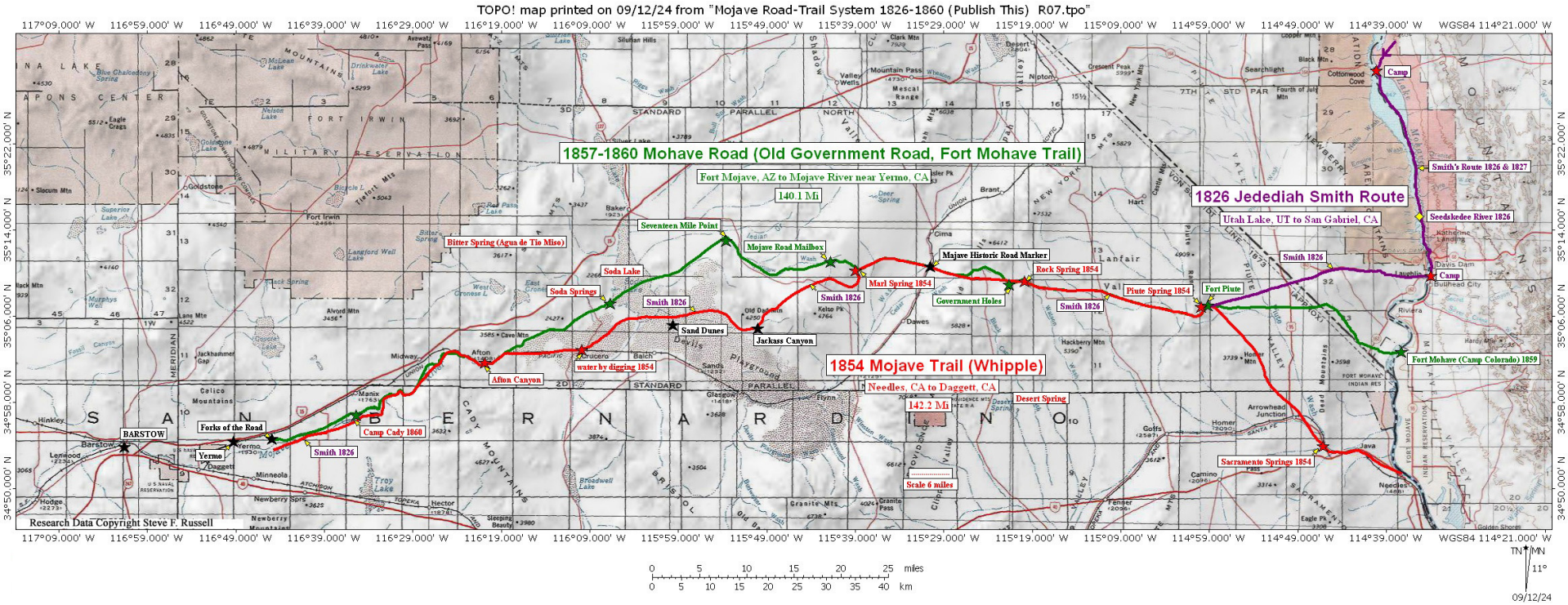
In my research map of the Mojave Trail-Road System, I decided to not include the north-south route portrayed in the NPS map. This route segment is shown as going from Piute Spring, northward to Las Vegas Wash, where it connected with the trails between Utah and southern California.

For additional information on the "Mojave Road," please consult the following Internet Source: https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-mojave-road-the-old-spanish-trail.htm
I believe this map is incorrect, this link is a good source of general informaition.

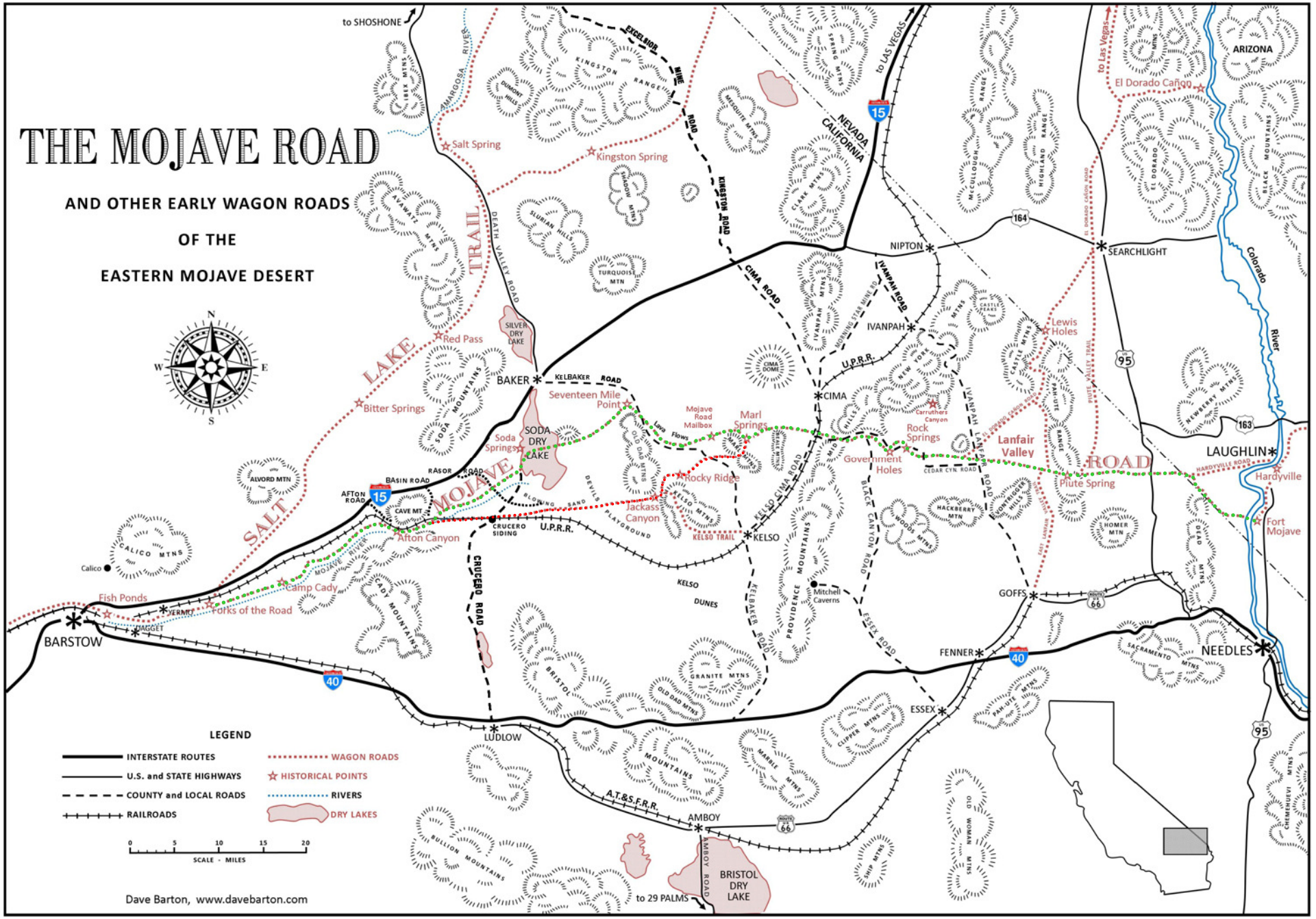
Maps for the Mojave Trail-Road System 1826-1860

Zoom the images for better resolution

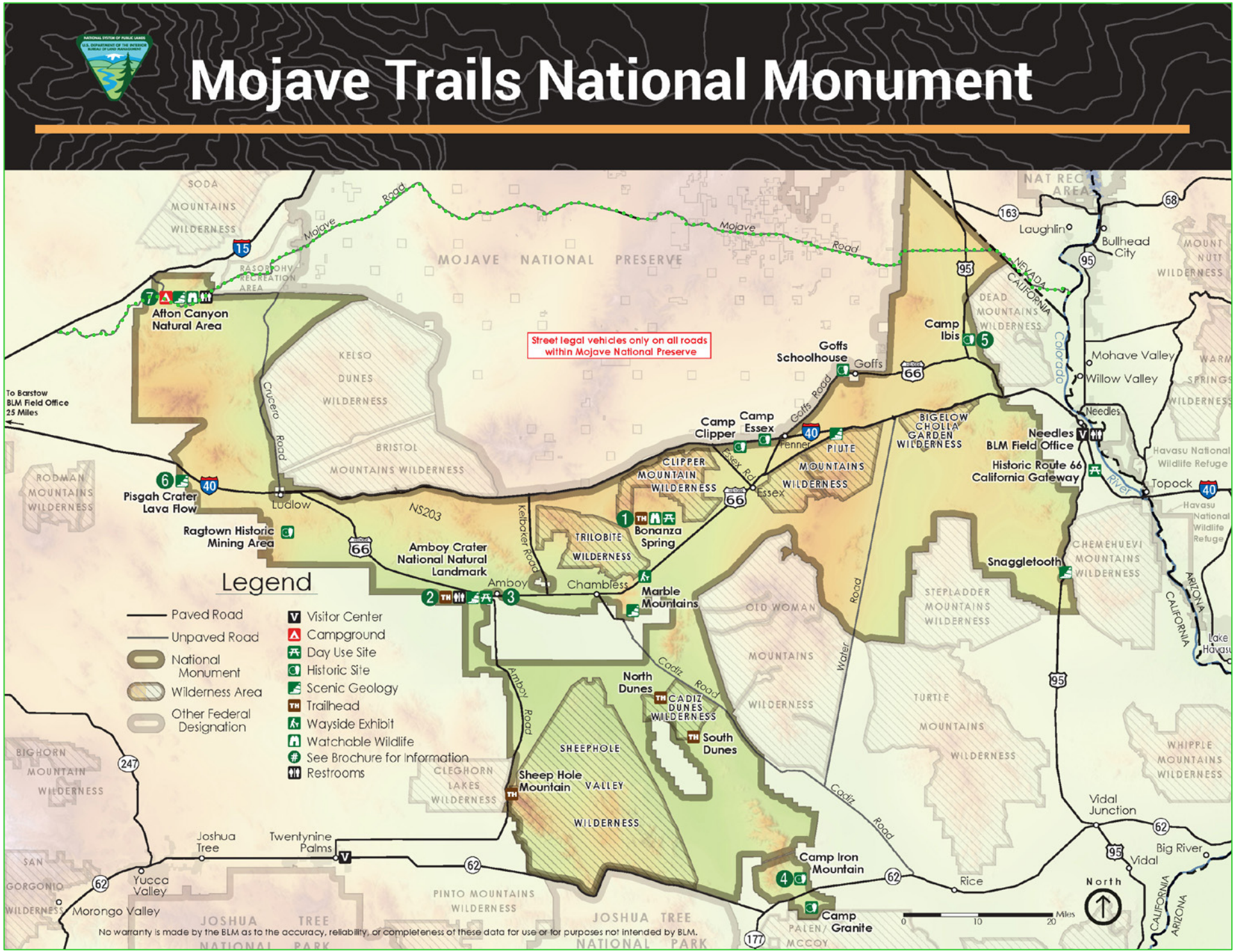
- Map-1. Research Map of the Mojave Trail-Road System. This map shows my research results containing the actual location of the 1854 Mojave Trail (red dotted) and 1857-1860 Mohave Road (green dotted). The landmarks shown are the landmarks for the trail (red) and the road (green).
- Map-2. The Mojave Road by David Barton. This map is the result of extensive investigation and on-the-ground travel by Mr. Barton. https://www.davebarton.com/mojave.html. Colored overlay traces have been added for the 1854 Mojave Trail (red dots) and the 1857-1860 Mohave Road (green dots). Mr. Barton does not separately show all the segments of the 1854 Mojave Trail.
- Map-3. Mojave Trails National Monument. This map was prepared by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The 1857-60 Mohave Road is shown but it is not the main feature of the map. To enhance the visibility of the 1857-1860 Mohave Road location, an overlay trace of red dots was added. I am not positive which route is being portrayed, the trail or the road.
- Map-4.1854 Mojave Trail Location (Whipple 1853-1854). An overlay trace of red dots has been added for better clarity. It is clear that the Whipple map is showing the trail.
- Map-5.1857-1860 Mohave Road Location (Wheeler 1875). An overlay trace of green dots has been added for better clarity. When compared with Whipple, there are pros and cons to both maps. I used data from both maps.
- Map-6. Map of the Mojave Road, National Park Service. I believe that the segment of the Mohave Road northward, as portrayed in the map, is incorrect. The true segment of the Mohave Road (or Mojave Trail?) has been overlaid with a dotted red line, added for clarity. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-mojave-road-the-old-spanish-trail.htm



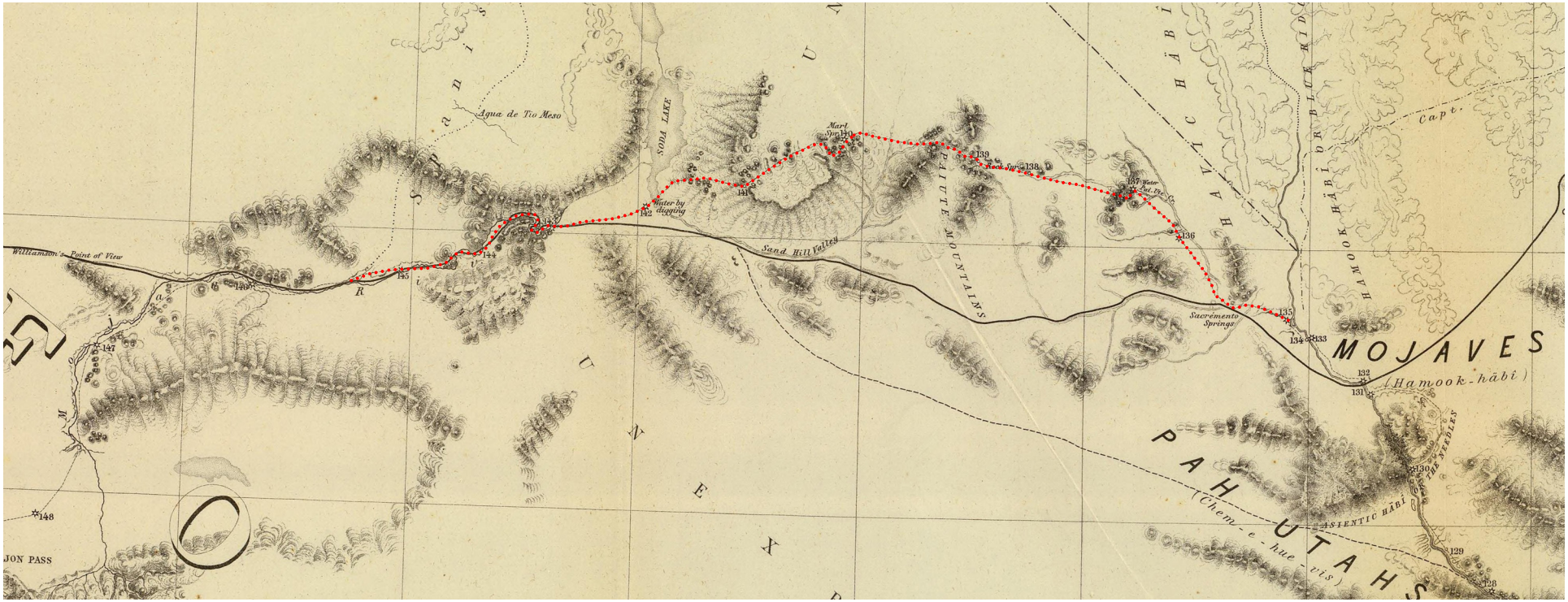
Map-1. Research Map of the Mojave Trail-Road System (Russell).



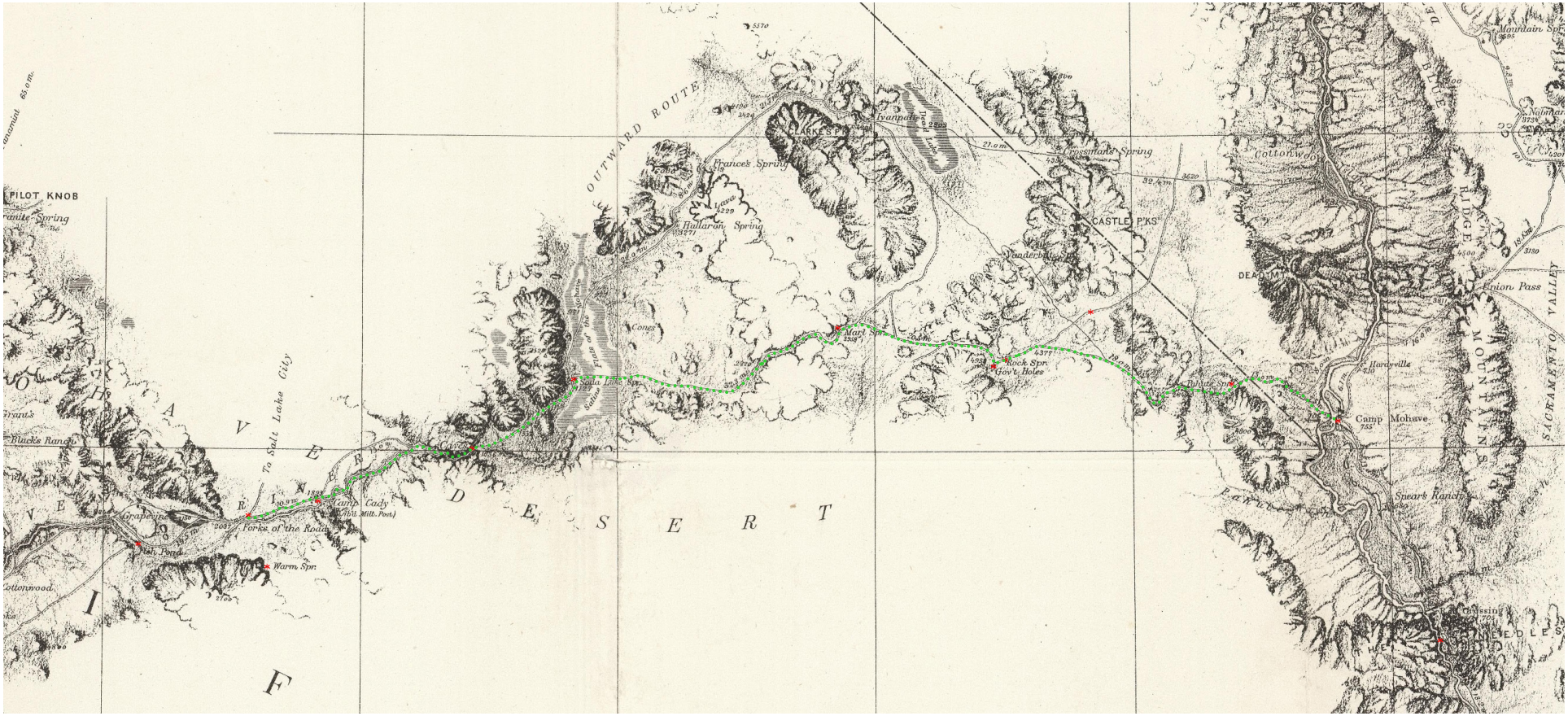
Map-2. The Mojave Road (Mojave Trail (Red) and Mohave Road (Green)) by David Barton



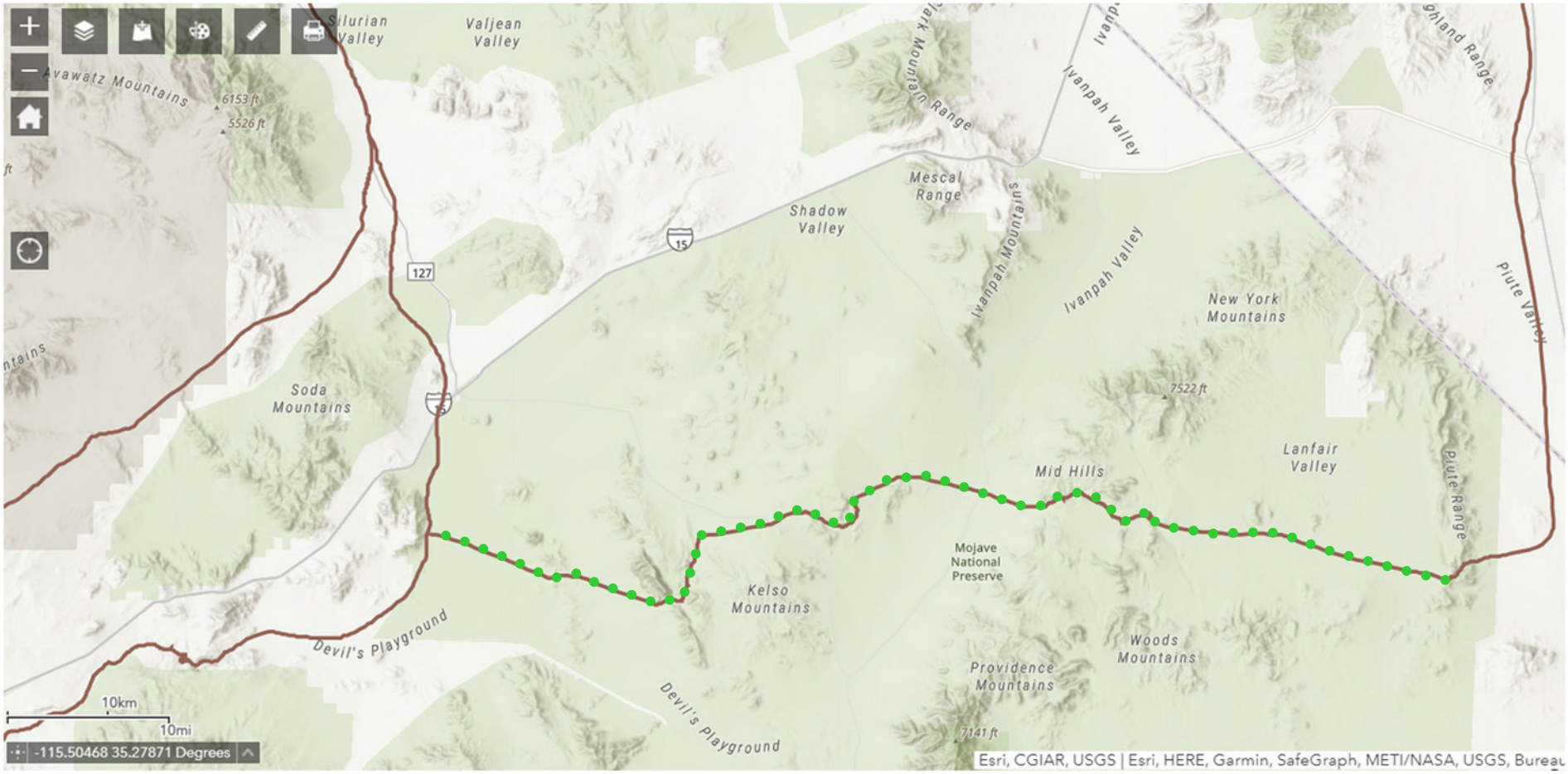
Map-3. Mojave Trails National Monument.



Map-4. 1854 Mojave Trail Location (Whipple 1853-1854)



Map-5. 1857-1860 Mohave Road Location (Wheeler 1875)



Map-6. Map of the Mojave Road, National Park Service